Declassified and Approved For Release 2011/12/21 : CIA-RDP90-00965R000706950054-9

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE E-13

WASHINGTON POST
12 June 1985

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CIA Backed Qaddafi Assassination Try

The Central Intelligence Agency backed, trained and continues to support the exile group that tried to assassinate Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi last year, according to intelligence sources.

The plot failed. Afterward, Qaddafi executed perhaps as many as 200 dissidents and imprisoned thousands more.

The Libyan dictator immediately beefed up his security. He may also have arranged Libya's surprise "union" with Morocco partly to get at the leader of the assassination attempt, who was subsequently booted out by Moroccan King Hassan and now operates out of Iraq.

The CIA-backed assassination group goes by the name National Front for the Salvation of Libya, or NFSL, and is led by Qaddafi's former auditor general, Mohammed Youssef Magarieff.

Whether the CIA was present at the NFSL's conception is uncertain. Our sources say the agency's search for "a surrogate organization that would overthrow Qaddafi by whatever means necessary" coincided with the exile group's formation in 1981.

How did the CIA pick Magarieff and his NFSL out of some 20 identifiable anti-Qaddafi groups? Our sources say the Saudis recommended Magarieff.

The Saudis have provided at least $7 million to the NFSL. They use Mustafa bin Halim, a former prime minister of Libya who is now an adviser to the Saudi Arabian government, as their go-between with Magarieff.

The boys from Langley found it easy to deal with Magarieff, a natty dresser and articulate talker, who conveys the impression that he is preeminent among Qaddafi's foes. When he served Qaddafi as head of the Libyan comptroller's commission from 1972 to 1977, Magarieff publicly inveighed against official corruption. It was that act of courage that led Qaddafi to ship him off as ambassador to India, where he defected in 1980.

Magarieff attracted other prominent exiles to his banner, including former Libyan envoys to Jordan, Guyana, India and Argentina. The exiles' first public proclamation, on Oct. 7, 1981, called for Qaddafi's overthrow and marked the birth of the NFSL.

From the beginning, CIA agents advised and encouraged NFSL leaders and trained their recruits in Western Europe, Sudan and Morocco.

Our sources disagree over how much advance information the CIA had about the assassination attempt of May 8, 1984. But there's little doubt that CIA officials knew what Magarieff was up to, and encouraged him. In fact, CIA insiders refer sardonically to the agents involved and their CIA handler, who was transferred after the assassination attempt failed.

The world learned some confused details of the attempt, which began to unravel on May 6, when the leader of NFSL's military wing, Ahmed Ibrahim Ahwas, was caught and killed trying to infiltrate Libya from Tunisia. Two days later, a five-hour gun battle at the Bab Aziziya barracks, where Qaddafi often stays, ended in the death or capture of the NFSL rebels.

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